

The Holy Family (A)
(Ecclesiasticus 3:2-6.12-14 / Matthew 2:13-15.19-23)
29.12.2013

“Families, I hate you! Shut-in homes, closed doors, jealous possessions of happiness”
(A. Gide).

These words written in 1897 by the French writer André Gide could hardly be said to be a balanced and dispassionate presentation of family. Their excess reveals a deep anger against families which seem to prevent life from circulating freely among the members of the small circle of relatives, and no doubt beyond this family circle as well.

The weakness of Gide’s statement lies in its generalisation. A way to redeem it would be to read it as follows: “Families, I hate you when you are shut-in homes, when your doors are closed and when you keep your happiness jealously therein”.

We all know that families may become unhealthy cells, that relationships between parents and children may be marked by physical and emotional forms of abuse. We all are aware of the many untold stories and hidden secrets, the few skeletons in many cupboards, which weigh so heavily on the lives of our families. In Northern Ireland, studies have shown that many children as young as 2 or 3 are able to develop negative attitudes about words such as Catholic, Protestant, RUC or IRA. Unfortunately we see that families can become seedbeds of violence and perpetuate bigotry and racism.

Our families go off the rails when they become self-centred, self-serving. They go the wrong track when they forget that ultimately they are at the service of the members of the family.

Sometimes, in their passionate defence of the family, some Christian discourses may give the impression that family life is the ultimate Christian value. We have to be careful not to defend an institution for the sake of the institution. Family is important because we believe that it is the best place for human life to grow, to blossom and bear fruit. So again we have to be reminded that family is at the service of the life of each one of its members.

When the family becomes an end in itself, then everything has to be done for the honour and the preservation of the group. The weak and problematic members are rejected or silenced, freedom is curtailed, emotional and financial blackmail rule the relationships. Is it necessary to mention here all the young pregnant unmarried women, all the disabled children who, until a very recent past, were kept hidden or sent far away from home for the sake of their families?

So you see, when we militate for the protection of the family, what kind of family are we promoting?

Today what can we learn from the Holy Family? In what way can the example of Joseph, Mary and Jesus can help our families to be, according to the words of Bl. John Paul II, “a true shrine of life and love” (Prayer for the Synod of Bishops, 25.08.80).

Mary, Joseph and Jesus could have been only three individuals loosely connected by strange circumstances. They became a family because they gave themselves to one another and because they received one another as gifts. Out of love, they helped one another to grow to their full stature, learning from one another what it meant to be a father and a husband, a woman and a wife, and a child.

It is important to say that gift does not imply possession. Given to each other Jesus, Joseph and Mary do not possess one another. They do not try to control or manipulate one another. In their mutual relationships, they do not use one another for the satisfaction of their

personal needs and they do not put pressure on one another for the fulfilment of their personal expectations.

There is love, so there is a bond and yet there is respect so there is distance and freedom.

What prevents our families from being *true shrines of life and love* is that, too often, they are closed in on themselves. Their members are a bit like flowers kept in a locked room without a window and so deprived of daylight and fresh air.

Families may sometimes feel a bit suffocating and so it is not surprising that there are some explosions of anger, leading up to break-ups in relationships, and forms of physical sickness or psychological illness.

For our families to become holy and truly human, like the Holy Family, spouses, parents and children must consent to change and to grow. To be a family is not a finished product given once and for all, it is a long process, a work in progress. We do not have control over all the changes which take place in our families. Other people, outside factors, society, and our bodies keep on calling us to adapt ourselves regularly to new ways of relating to one another. This can be a real challenge. However to reject the changes or to deny them the right to be is to prevent life from blossoming. We have to remember that, according to Bl. John Henry Newman, "to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often" (*An Essay... in Guides... n. 46, p. 32*).

In becoming a child in a human family Jesus shows us that our families can become a path to human maturity and holiness. It is certainly not an easy and smooth path and yet our families are the first and most important school where we learn what it means to be a human being in relationship with God, with oneself and with others. We have to encourage respectful and liberating relationships between all the members of our families.

Whether they have hurt us or blessed us, our families are for ever part of our identity as human beings and as Christians. Let us learn to look at them with the love and the distance expected from mature men and women. Let us strive to make our families *true shrines of life and love*.